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SIGNS AND THINKING

WHO has the right to put up signs? Obviously, we say, those with duly constituted authority. The usefulness of signs is self-evident. Place-name signs along the highway, giving direction and distance, are indispensable to the traveler. Directories of every sort have a similar function and are in effect signs. Signs convey information concerning which no dialogue is necessary. They make available facts which are needed, or likely to be needed, by the person who sees them. They define the established conditions of doing what we want or need to do.

Signs also instruct in what we are *supposed* to do, representing the decisions of legislators. They tell us to keep off the grass, not to make fires, and to avoid a great many other things which experience has shown incur disorder or danger to others. Books containing the laws of the land might be regarded as elaborate signs, since they provide information about requirements held by common consent to be beyond debate.

There are also signs of quite a different sort—the Pyramids, for example. The interpreters of these great monuments may read them differently, but they nearly all agree that they were meant by their builders to convey a range or hierarchy of possible meanings. They are signs which invite reflection. They may have been tombs, but they are also symbols of rebirth. They have, some say, connection with the cosmic order. Their architecture sometimes reveals a knowledge of astronomy. They are three-dimensional metaphors of the larger human situation. And so, in varying degree, are other great monuments. Book after book has been written about the meaning of the pyramids, about Stonehenge, about great temples in the Far East, and the possibilities of such interpretations are far from exhausted. Sometimes monuments go beyond representation of the metaphysical order, giving directions for conduct. Asoka, the famous Buddhist monarch of India, erected columns bearing inscriptions which instructed the people in the duties of human life. Asoka was a king who was converted to nonviolence, and he felt it his duty to spread the word.

What do all signs have in common? The man who puts up a sign is in effect declaring that what the sign says is incontrovertible truth. Argument would be a useless distraction from the reality of what is declared. Signs are or ought to be about completely settled matters. They are visual versions of the declarative sentence: Ahead is a railroad crossing or a bend in the road. Trust, we should note, is a precondition of benefitting from signs.

Signs, then, tell us how to get along in the physical world, how to manage our lives in the political state, how to conduct our affairs in reasonable harmony with other people. They stand for what we collectively know, or believe that we know. Ideally, that is, this is the function of signs. There are of course occasions when signs become vastly irritating—as for example when you get a senseless letter from a computer instead of a human being. We call a society which relies mostly on signs for maintaining order a totalitarian society. The people have nothing to say. They do what they are told. Doubt concerning the orders is not merely irrelevant but subversive. To question the import or legitimacy of what the signs say becomes a threat to authority when there has been no voluntary agreement with the purposes represented by the signs.

All this has to do with our public lives and social relations. What about the area of thought? Is the function of the sign employed in literature and the arts?

Well, literature is full of declarative sentences. Like a sign, the declarative sentence reveals. It is not intended to raise questions but to articulate or embellish the reality of what is affirmed.

On the road and in social life, signs provide the framework of common assumption—the rules, as we say, for being free. Freedom obtains its scope from the context of limitation. In thought a similar principle prevails. We cannot think except in some framework of limiting assumption. The stipulations of thought provide the ground of thinking. The things we know, or are certain of, make possible our inquiries into what we don't know. Ignorance, in short, is a necessity of gaining knowledge, therefore a condition of life. Growth in knowledge is the conversion of our ignorance into stipulated fact. If the knowledge is about the world, we call it science.

Thought, however,—the thought embodied in literature,—attempts to add knowledge of the meaning of the world to our knowledge of its appearance. Knowledge of meaning relates of course to ourselves, since human purpose makes meaning important, even all-important. Here, too, we can't begin to think without making stipulations. We know, for example, that we want to stay alive. Survival, we say, is good. We know that we want to avoid pain. The absence of pain is good. We usually stipulate these things without bothering to say so. But there are qualifications. "Give me liberty or death," declared Patrick Henry. For him, his survival was not so important as his freedom. He would prefer to die without it. And doctors carefully explain that pain may be a necessity of getting well, or of knowing that there *is* an ill requiring attention. Then there is the pain which, if not welcomed, is at least sturdily endured by competing athletes. Your stomach, a swimmer said, "feels as though it's going to fall out." Every kick hurts, but "if you push through the pain barrier into real agony, you're a champion." And there are inevitable growing pains, as distinguished from signals from a maltreated body. Every significant transformation—involving a break with the past and a reaching toward a higher level of existence—is attended by pain; the past, you could say, fights desperately for its life. In short, the framework of assumptions about pain must include various puzzling qualifications, and if you let the philosophers have their say, they will add that pleasure can have no recognition save in contrast with its opposite: pleasure and pain are inseparable.

It seems apparent that all a declarative sentence can do is set the stage for further inquiry, if our object is to understand the meaning of experience. The "sign" sort of communication eliminates active participation by the reader. This was Plato's objection to the written word. He compared books to the "set speeches" of orators. They are like paintings, he said, which "maintain a most majestic silence." Plato preferred the living speech, animated by interchange between eager minds, and when he wrote, he imitated this speech. Plato felt so strongly about this that in the *Phaedrus* he has the high God of Egypt reproach the proud inventor or writing, saying:

> If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on what is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.

Emerson makes the same point differently in "The American Scholar." To record a truth is a noble act, he says. What comes to the writer as life he gives back as truth. Yet, when written down, "something happens to the truth":

> The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation—the act of thought—is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer

> was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of reason, having once received this book, stands upon it and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles.

Yet there are books which inform us of the limitations of books, as in Plato's dialogues and Emerson's essays. Here the "signs" or declarative sentences are concerned with the likelihood of self-deception and with the human tendency to mistake appearance for reality. It begins to be evident, too, that the intent of the writer and the temper of the reader have a great deal to do with the effect of reading. There are subtleties enough in all serious written discourse, but to these must be added the delicately varying factors of what the reader brings to the book, not only what he knows and how he thinks, but also how he feels at the time of reading.

These considerations make judgment of the role of books difficult. One person or student will read a book, eagerly absorbing its content, grateful for what he is taught, happy in the idea that he is increasing his knowledge. Another reader will take each statement as a possibility, not a conclusion, and ask himself if there are other possibilities. For him the declarative sentence is always problematic, not revelatory. Such individuals are likely to find themselves driven from physics or biology to psychology. If the human view of the world is always a relative thing—relative to the declarations about it which prevail at a given time—then what we call "knowledge" is an ephemeral combination of what we have heard with our impressions of how things appear, and what we, at the same moment, think about them. This becomes the assertion that the world is always our psychological creation. Yet our solipsistic conclusion is shaky, since there is a sense in which we *know* that there is something out there which exists of itself and consists of itself and must be more than merely our conception of it.

The forms of art have a part in these matters. Some expressions of the artist are meant to engage us wholly with the impact of experience, the high drama of appearance. Their "success" depends on capturing our unreflective attention. The director of a movie like *Psycho,* for example, is concerned with controlling the *feelings* of his audience. He fails if the people are allowed to "think," for then the illusion fades. The motion picture, in other words, is a medium which invites and relies upon submission. The audience is intended to submit to the embrace of the drama's feeling. One can understand the goal of this intention without agreeing with its justification. There is a fine feeling of abandon in giving oneself up to an experience. To be one hundred per cent involved in a spectacle is a passive version of total commitment. In such situations the intellect is either transcended or overwhelmed and displaced. The either/or-ism of the mind is left behind.

The question then becomes: Did we leave thinking behind because we found no further need for it, its limit having been reached, or did we stop thinking from pleasure, fear, anxiety, or apathy? Are we, that is, still fooling ourselves with some kind of spurious certainty, or has the experience conducted us to an authentic ante-chamber of truth?

There are art forms which encourage such questions, while others are dissolved by them. Is the artist implicitly a psychologist and philosopher, or some kind of prestidigitator? Does he want to blind you with sensory or emotional impact, or induce a reflective revery? Is he, in short, an entertainer or a sage?

So who, we must ask again, has the right to put up signs?

Quite evidently, some are indispensable. They give definitions of the terrain of life, declare assumptions we can hardly do without. Ideally, they are the help we are able to give one

another—expressions of common knowledge. The geographer helps us by telling us what lies beyond the mountains, where the water is, and how far the ocean extends. We need this knowledge; having it compiled for us and put on signs, or in handbooks, saves a lot of time. It gives us, you could say, some leisure for thinking.

And what is thinking? It is going beyond the content of the signs. It is considering possibilities in order to find higher levels of assumption. We call this "progress," and it is made by subtle combinations of fresh assumptions plus the questions they provoke. It has no end—except in abstract theory. Always, as the beckoning finality, there is the idea of an absolute goal; but always, as the intuition of infinity, there is the possibility of what lies beyond. Yet in the present moment, finality does exist for us in the necessity to act on the basis of what we know *now*. But we also recognize that both assumptions and questions will continue to exist in the future, and in *its* future, and so on.

Curiously, there are signs—declarative statements—which help to make all this clear. They are declarative statements about the way our minds work, about our *being*, at every level of assumption and questioning. They are not dependent on any particular achievement or lack of knowledge, but give light on the human process. They are not given as subjects for dispute. For example the twin verses which begin the *Dhammapada:*

> All that we are is the result of what we have thought: all that we are is founded on our thoughts and formed of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain pursues him, as the wheel of the wagon follows the hoof of the ox that draws it.
>
> All that we are is the result of what we have thought: all that we are is founded on our thoughts and formed of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness pursues him like his own shadow that never leaves him.

What about the world? Is it possible to put up any signs—compose reliable books—about its nature or the cause of its existence?

In the early 1890's, in Yokahama, Lafcadio Hearn met an old Buddhist priest of whom he asked this question. Hearn, as an artist, took his responsibilities very seriously. He accepted, you could say, the priestly function of the artist. He knew that the artist, like everyone else who expresses himself well, must declare revelations and also ask questions. He wanted to keep these responsibilities in balance, so that they would fulfill one another, helping the human process to go on without serious mishap.

How, he asked the priest, does Buddha's teaching explain both the world and mind?

> "Buddhism," the old priest answered, "does not teach, as other religions do, that things have been produced by creation. The one and only Reality is the universal Mind, called in Japanese Shinnyo (Sanscrit: *Bhuta-Tathata*)—the Reality-in-its-very-self, infinite and eternal. Now this infinite Mind within Itself beheld its own sentiency. And, even as one who is in hallucination assumes apparitions to be actualities, so the Universal Entity took for external existences that which it beheld only within itself. We call this illusion Mu-myo (*Avidya*), signifying 'without radiance,' or void of illumination'."

Avidya, Hearn said, has been translated by Western scholars as "Ignorance." The priest replied:

> "So I have been told. But the idea conveyed by the word we use is not the idea expressed by the term 'ignorance.' It is rather the idea of enlightenment misdirected, or of illusion."

Ignorance, in short, is not some sort of intrinsic darkness which shadows the world, but the result of misapplications of the power of mind. Like knowledge, it is a human creation. Greek philosophy or mysticism presents a similar idea. Alexander Wilder, a nineteenth-century scholar and Platonist, in his introductory essay to the *Eleusinian Mysteries,* observes:

> The undercurrent of this world is set towards one goal; and inside of human credulity . . . is a power almost infinite, a holy faith capable of apprehending the supremest truths of all existence.

What then is credulity before it becomes the folly of too-easy belief? It is both trust in and the capacity for enlightenment. Through it we are able to hold in the mind the idea of the world and how it works, and of ourselves and how we work. The power to be wrong has no meaning unless, as potentiality, it is also the power to be right.

Only a little reflection confirms what Wilder says about the power "inside of human credulity." Do we realize, despite all the deceptions of men, how much of our lives depends upon trust in one another? We are born into the total trust of infancy. The babe finds the security he needs in his mother's arms. This becomes the delighting, wide-eyed credulity of the child. He eagerly believes what people say. He is at the stage where signs are his universe. He subsists upon faith and grows within its protecting shield. Later he is obliged to ask questions. In short, he begins to think. He is compelled by life to cope with various levels of illusion. What we call ignorance, and Eastern philosophers illusion, is only the raw material of knowledge, a misdirection of the power to know. We create ignorance as much as knowledge. The rungs of the ladder of growth are made of ignorance or illusion, transcended as we climb. Everything depends upon the climber. A hear-say transcendence of some common illusion can be found in books. This speaks to human longing. Its explanation has intellectual symmetry or elegance, and we may believe it *without* knowing it. The book declares the facsimile of truth, but cannot reveal the original, which must be independently discovered by the reader. So, as Emerson said, "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst."

Something of this meaning is in Vinoba Bhave's observation:

> In the *Upanishads*, the praises of ignorance are sung side by side with the praises of knowledge. Man needs not only knowledge but ignorance too. Knowledge alone, or ignorance alone, leads him into darkness. But the union of fitting knowledge with fitting ignorance is the nectar of eternity. The world is so filled with the matter of knowledge that men would go mad if they were to attempt to cram all of it into their heads.

This seems a way of saying that the learned of the modern world have put up too many signs, have declared too many certainties, when they should have been asking questions—holding dialogue with themselves—all along.

REVIEW
THE RESOURCES OF WILLIAM BLAKE

KATHLEEN RAINE'S *Blake and Antiquity* (a Bollingen Series paperback issued last year by Princeton University Press, $5.95) is a book by a scholar for Blake lovers. They make an ardent crowd, the Blake lovers, often themselves artists or writers. Dull would he be of soul who did not feel some kinship with this rebellious visionary. He was wroth with his times, yet worked off his indignation by the production of beauty. And there were reaches of high meaning behind the charm of his drawings and the lyrical magic of his verse. He drew on reservoirs his age could not understand. As Kathleen Raine shows, only now are we beginning to learn of the paths he took to the Pierian Spring.

Blake was many things. He was Platonist and Neoplatonist, Alchemist and Paracelsian. He knew the Hermetic literature and had read Swedenborg. He was so many things that it is better simply to say that he was their synthesis in an artist. All his life he made runes so rare in form and invitation that one's love affair with William Blake may begin in childhood and last to the end of life, with ever growing appreciation of his work. For readers—at least some readers—a writer's reference to Blake always glows a bit, as though promising a wonder or two. The man who may be the greatest lyric poet of our century—William Butler Yeats—was a Blake lover.

Why does one become a Blake lover? The beauty in sound and sight is not enough to explain it. Children may be captured by his verse, but that is only the beginning. His poems have a molten quality. Once, in a meadow long ago, we saw a bottled gentian so filled with life that the delicate walls of its petaled enclosure seemed to tremble with irrepressible emotion. A great bumblebee, it turned out, had got inside and couldn't get out! But Blake found his way out in those songs which will go on echoing century after century.

What is it about Blake which makes us see and feel more in him, every time we read him? Kathleen Raine sets out to help with an answer to this question. In her introduction she speaks of the time when for scholars Blake was the great "original," an artist who owed nothing to tradition. Through her studies she found that Blake was *soaked* in tradition. He was an omniverous reader of the classics and was for a time a close friend of Thomas Taylor, the first translator into English of Plato and Plotinus. For Kathleen Raine, Blake was an eighteenth-century herald of a change in thinking that only now is coming to fruition:

> Blake's greatest disciple . . . W. B. Yeats, announcing the end of a cycle and the advent of the "rough beast," was but following Blake. "The rise of soul against intellect, now beginning in the world," announced by Yeats, has brought with it a return to the excluded knowledge—Neo-Platonism, alchemy, astrology, Cabbala—besides more recent studies of Indian metaphysics, comparative mythology, psychical research, and the psychology of the unconscious. All these and other related fields of knowledge, once dismissed piecemeal, are now seen to belong to a coherent way of understanding and exploring what we choose to call "reality."

The material of which this book is a condensation was first published in two volumes as *Blake and Tradition* fifteen years ago. Today the author finds the modern mind far more receptive to the idea of Blake as a Platonic enthusiast:

> What I then labored to establish by accumulated detail is now increasingly taken for granted. Nor is it any longer possible to dismiss Thomas Taylor from the scene; it is now known that Blake and Taylor were on intimate terms, at least for a time. Scholarship has come to the aid of common sense, and James King has given us, from the Meredith papers, a lifelike picture of the two sages: the Platonist, characteristically demonstrating to Blake step by step some Euclidian theorem, and our visionary exclaiming, "Ah, never mind that—what's the use of going to prove it. Why, I see with my eyes that it is so, and do not require any proof to make it clearer."

Miss Raine wonders whether this spirit of Blake's, now renewed in a great many Blake lovers, will render unnecessary all the details she assembles to show how Blake drew on Neoplatonic tradition. Then she says:

> I hope nevertheless that some of the "minute particulars" which gave me such delight in the discovery will communicate something of the same delight to a younger generation of Blake lovers. Of course the details given in such a book as this from the wealth of source-material are only the tip of a submerged continent of knowledge—a country with which Blake was familiar—and I can only report, from my own explorations, that this Lost Atlantis is a land of treasures and marvels. Blake's "Golden string" leads not only through his own labyrinth, but is the clue leading to so much more. Neo-Platonism, with its mythology and symbolism, is indeed the local European idiom (as Coomaraswamy would say) of a universal and unanimous tradition. Those sources from which Blake drew his knowledge—and in our own century, Jung, Yeats, and increasing numbers of their followers—are learning of the imagination itself. The excluded knowledge of the last two or three centuries seems likely to become the sacred scriptures of a New Age for which spirit, not matter, is again the primary reality.

Yet for all Miss Raine's delighting persuasions, there seems a sense in which Blake was also a true "original"—a man whose mind was a record of rich self-discoveries which turned out to be in tune with the Platonic and other philosophic traditions, these becoming for him mostly confirmation. There is always the question: Did he think of that himself or did he read it somewhere? In the case of most works worth reading, the answer must be—both! To find his own feelings articulated in the images set down by philosophers and mystics of two thousand years before must have been highly exciting to Blake. He was enriched by those images, but his genius was his own.

Blake is thus a startling example of what we sometimes feel to be in lesser ways the case with ourselves. We carry around with us whole libraries of half-formed wonderings and unborn intuitions—feelings of the hidden symmetries of the world and the rhythms of life, and then we find some ancient poet or thinker writing of these things! What if there is actually the "universal and unanimous tradition" of which Coomaraswamy speaks, which leaves a trail of wonderful clues in literature across the centuries—arising in spontaneous inspiration as well as from transmission in books? If this can happen in mathematics—Newton and Leibniz formulating the principles of the calculus independently, at about the same time—then why not in philosophy too?

The sense of these symmetries comes to us, but then must be filtered into the mind of the times. An inspiration akin to Neoplatonic flights surely came to the German transcendentalists, to Lessing and some others, for example, just as, a century or so later, Schopenhauer echoed—if somewhat thinly—Upanishadic verities, and as today, many great themes of ancient thought are blooming again in a new idiom. If this be the law of our common mind, finding expression in individual channels, the whole of cultural history will some day have to be written in terms of these cycles of reawakening.

Meanwhile, the reader deserves at least a good sample of Kathleen Raine's exposition. She says in one place:

> Blake returned again and again to the problem of evil in the symbolic terms of a "descent" of the soul from a world of spiritual light into a world of material darkness; but behind the story of the soul lies the cosmic problem of the origin and nature of the world. The original "descent" of light or spirit, into matter, or darkness, has been expressed in many fables: the dismembering of Osiris and the scattering of his body over the earth; the laceration of Dionysus; the *deus absconditus*, or hidden god, of Alchemy, made prisoner in matter. As the individual soul has its cycle of descent and return, so have these symbolic figures of the divine power in cosmos itself.
>
> Blake, who considered Paracelsus as great as Shakespeare, knew the Alchemical tradition; and that strange poem "The Crystal Cabinet" seems to summarize the Alchemical doctrine of the imprisoning of light in matter. The very title is

Alchemical; the "cabinet" is a term used by Thomas Vaughan (Eugenius Philalethes), brother of the poet Henry Vaughan, for the physical body in which spirit dwells. In his book *Aula Lucis* (the tent of light) he writes that "matter is the house of light . . . when he (that is light or spirit) first enters it, it is a glorious transparent room, a crystal castle, and he lives like a Familiar in diamonds. He hath the liberty to look out at the windows, his love is all in his sight: I mean that liquid Venus which lures him in; but this continues not long," says Vaughan; for the feminine watery principle makes the light her prisoner, so that at last "he is quite shut up in darkness." The same story is told in Blake's poem:

> The Maiden caught me in the Wild
> Where I was dancing merrily;
> She put me into her Cabinet
> And Lock'd me up with a Golden Key

The maiden is our by now familiar water-nymph or "liquid Venus," and the merry dancer the light or spirit which she captures and encloses in a body.

Blake, Kathleen Raine says, has long been regarded as "an eccentric in a traditional civilization," and T. S. Eliot accused him of "a certain meanness of culture." Replying to this careless slur, she writes:

> A culture which embraced Plato and Plotinus, the Bible and the *Hermetica,* English science and philosophy, the tradition of Alchemy, Gibbon and Herodotus, besides the body of English poetry—not to mention his equally wide knowledge of painting—can scarcely be called mean. . . . Blake, like Dante, derived his knowledge of the soul from the ancients. He was a traditionalist in a society that had as a whole lapsed from tradition. To the modern reader he appears most original when he is least so, most cranky when he is communicating traditional doctrine, and most personal when his theme is metaphysical reality, expressed in canonical symbols. Yeats was perfectly aware of this, but evidently follows the old injunction not to divulge the mysteries, lest, as D. H. Lawrence also understood, people "knowing the formulae, without undergoing the experience that corresponds, should grow insolent and impious, thinking they have the all, when they have only an empty monkey chatter. . . ." All the same, Blake wished to be understood, and knew that he would be fully understood only by those in possession of the traditional language of symbols. . . .

Blake and Antiquity is the work of a scholar who serves the lovers of literature, and other scholars incidentally.

COMMENTARY
SOME "HEALTH CARE" NUMBERS

IN one of his early books, Ivan Illich remarked that 85 per cent of the common ills of the Mexican people could be cared for by good nurses. This reality is apparently getting through to health administrators in the United States. A writer in the *New York Times* for July 30 tells about "a new breed of practitioners"—more than nurses but less than doctors—who are serving the needs of outlying regions in this country. According to the *Times* writer: "Dr. Karen Davis, the chief health planner at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, says that while 60 per cent of all doctors are now being trained as specialists, only 20 per cent Or all doctor visits require a specialist's care."

In 1965 Duke University began training nurse practitioners and physician assistants as "physician extenders," and in 1979 federal funds were provided for their education. This year, Congress voted that they could be paid under Medicare and Medicaid. Today more than a hundred universities and hospitals are training people (about 15,000) for this work, and all but a handful of states have passed laws permitting them to practice. This unexpected permissiveness doubtless resulted from the unwillingness of doctors to practice in isolated areas. Several states allow the "physician extenders" to run clinics and to prescribe drugs, if they consult with an M.D. by phone.

The other side of the picture is outlined by Tristram Coffin in an article (in the Aug. 1 *Washington Spectator*) revealing that health care is now "the third largest industry in the country" and that "Doctors are getting rich faster than any other occupational group," with a median income of about $63,000 a year. The main problem, this writer says, is that the doctor, not the patient, decides what needs to be done. Involved is the excessive use of medical technology. Dr. John Knowles, head of Rockefeller Foundation, told a reporter:

> "It [medical technology] is a mindless rubber stamp. If you have a headache, you get every damn test known to man, because there is a 1-in-500 chance you might have a brain tumor. In fact, the chances are closer to one in 5,000 but if the doctor misses that one, you can sue him for $2 million."

So far, "not one judgment of malpractice has ever been made against a physician extender," if that means anything.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING

NOW and then the best thing to do with this space seems to be to run hero stories. "See what these people did in spite of terrible obstacles" is a good way to begin whatever you write about, these days. For all the obstacles seem pretty appalling. That we can find some heroes to write about makes pretty good news to report.

Well, we have two hero stories. For preface to the first, we quote a paragraph from *The Inhabitants* by Julius Horwitz. The author is (was) a social worker in New York who put his experiences in Spanish Harlem in a novel. What was it like there?

> Lexington and Park are fancy names in New York City. But East Harlem begins at the end of Madison Avenue, at the end of Fifth Avenue, at the absolute dead end of Park Avenue. The narcotics sellers have made it their open-air market. They've taught everyone from kids to old women to jab needles into their arms or sniff up white powder. Narcotics in East Harlem are what gin must have been in Hogarth's London. (Signet paperback, 1962.)

This is the setting for the hero story we found in an article on Spanish Harlem by Earl Shorris, in the June *Harper's*. The neighborhood doesn't seem to have changed:

> The precise day on which the New York City school system failed has not yet been determined. It must have been quite some time ago, however, if one may judge by the laments of the citizens. Since then, hope has been abandoned. The middle class joined the upper middle and upper classes in sending its children to private schools, the teachers became custodians of people they believed were the whores and junkies of the future, if not the present, and vital opportunities for the black and Hispanic children of New York City all but disappeared. Among Hispanic children the dropout rate prior to completion of the twelfth grade holds steady at 80 per cent. A large percentage of graduates are functional illiterates. The waste of human potential compares with that of the underdeveloped nations.

It's hard to imagine anyone choosing to be a teacher in that area, but Awilda Orta did. She grew up in Spanish Harlem and had another impression of the area:

> "I still live in El Barrio," she said. "I had a good childhood there. The neighborhood was like an extended family, 119th Street to us was like a small town. Many of us have not left. The members of the professions who are living here now are reinvesting in the barrio."

When she started teaching there she saw that the Hispanic culture was dying out. "Now," she says, "ours is among the best bilingual programs in the country. Now, we have fantastically high teacher morale."

The anecdotal part of Mr. Shorris' story gets across what Mrs. Orta means. The "hero" part is his summary of her accomplishment:

> For all that Awilda Orta radiates into the school one must still ask what substantive changes she has made in her year as principal. The school, known in the neighborhood as Jailhouse 99, has the same walls and the same budget and most of the same teachers and exactly the same kind of children as it did when Awilda Orta got a truck and moved her own furniture into the principal's office, so she didn't have to wait until the school system got around to it.
>
> A year ago I.S. 99 ranked among the lowest in the district. Only 9 per cent were reading at grade level. The halls were filled with unruly children at all hours. Absenteeism was high, parents were trying to move their children to other schools in the district. After a year of Awilda Orta's work the number of children reading at grade level increased to 15 per cent. During class hours the halls are quiet, the children study. Nothing is stolen from the library. When the school system said it would take two years to process a work order to change the electrical shop into an art room, the teachers did the work, moving the heavy shop tables and equipment themselves. And finally, the art teacher used her own money to buy bright yellow coverings for the shop tables. The children are learning photography and printing, as well as reading. They hold elections, perform plays. The principal has written to corporations, asking the donation of a cash register to help teach her children more usable skills. She goes to Washington to get grants for the school to increase its resources.

As for pupil "morale," there is a kind of discipline:

> Little girls, dressed to the brazen style of the streets of Spanish Harlem, kiss the principal of I.S. 99. They speak Spanish or English, but not in the mixture of languages, not in Spanglish, the lingua franca of the barrio. Culture, one recalls her saying, not the culture of poverty. Perhaps discipline, too, for the purpose of being, not for its own sake, Latin discipline, made of embraces that could be withdrawn, of eyes that would harden, of kisses that could become perfunctory; but not of the disapproval that strikes out against a child, not of the exclusion that wastes; there are no suspensions: a child can be more or less loved, but not unloved; no anger of unbearable duration.

Mr. Shorris wondered why it happened—this wonderful change in the school—and in the surrounding community, too. "Of course," he adds, "it can be argued that what has happened in I.S. 99 is anomalous, a miracle. If so, then evidence has been given that miracles are made of will."

Our other hero story comes from a couple of pages in *Weeping in the Playtime of Others* (McGraw-Hill, 1976, $3.95) by Kenneth Wooden—250 pages of horrors concerning what happens to America's incarcerated children. This is a book one hates to read, but feels obliged to, since it is necessary to know about these things. The story begins with the account of a boy once called bright by a teacher, but who was made to withdraw by the taunts from other children who mocked his speech impediment. By thirteen he could barely read.

> Teachers told the boy's mother how dumb and slow he was and report cards recorded their professional predictions: in Fifth grade he had seventeen F's. Failing assignments or tests were marked F's as large as the paper itself. Psychological assaults from peers, neighbors and teachers fed the fire of frustration and hostility. Soon he was constantly in trouble and had become the class clown. He spent more and more time in the principal's office and in after-school detention. He destroyed books and classroom equipment and broke school windows. One seventh-grade teacher predicted the kid would end up in prison because of his rowdy behavior and attitude. The secondary principal informed Ken's mother that he had a vile temper, and expulsion was threatened. Ken beat up one classmate so badly the victim had to be taken to a hospital. Later his vandalism spread to the streets. A hotel, movie house, yacht club, machine shop—all were his targets for breaking and entering. Streetlights were broken and arson lit the riverfront more than once. He was arrested at gun point in a small alley, a block away from his home, for stealing a neighbor's car. It was only through the efforts of his parents that a juvenile judge spared him imprisonment.
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> He graduated from high school and was denied employment at a soap factory because he couldn't read well enough to fill out the firm's application blank. Finally he became a construction laborer for a year, then was drafted into the army. To while away empty hours, he became a library assistant and slowly, painfully, read his first book, and another and another. After two years in the service, he went back to his high school and said he wanted to go to college. They laughed at him.
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> His new wife didn't laugh, however, and helped tutor the young man till he graduated with honors from Glassboro State College in 1962. Burlington High School gave him a contract to teach—the same school from which he graduated with a folder stating his IQ was 78.
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> That boy, who knew the humiliation and bitter frustration of a crippling education, who was judged marginally retarded and who constantly broke the law, believed very strongly that there is a close relationship between poor reading ability and crime.
>
> That boy became the author of this book.

The contents of Ken Wooden's book double the importance of the hero story.

FRONTIERS

Useful Institution

MEMBERS of the lost generation who wandered Europe after World War II, ending as inhabitants of camps for Displaced Persons, were eventually made to realize that anyone who lacked a certain piece of paper—a passport or an identity card—might not be admitted to exist. To be recognized as a human being, one had to belong to a State. Legality had priority over humanity.

A parallel situation now exists in another area—that of doing good. If you don't have a piece of paper on which the Bureau of Internal Revenue admits that you are an authentic do-gooder, your philanthropic motives will be not merely suspect, but deemed non-existent, and the gifts you make will establish the calculus of tax evasion—a punishable offense. In addition, no large enterprise in philanthropy can be undertaken, by reason of a number of practical obstacles, without the corporate identity of a non-profit institution. One could even say that social morality is not admitted to be real except in terms of the rules devised to hold together an acquisitive society animated by the centrifugal forces of self-interest.

So, if you want to set going currents of action—helping people directly, in ways that seem best to you—you may find it necessary to take out corporate papers and become an institution of the sort which, at heart, you would like to do away with. You agree to do some things backward in order to get other things right side up. Is this possible? There is evidence that it may be possible if the human beings involved are strong and clear in their purposes. Lately we learned of a case in which a non-profit corporation has been able to bypass virtually all the political and bureaucratic filters and transmit its undiluted benefits to people in need.

The Direct Relief Foundation, 404 East Carillo Street, Santa Barbara, Calif. 93101, pursues diverse philanthropic activities with a minimum of distraction. It began—not the institution, but the idea which gave it being—in 1945 when William Zimdin, an Estonian refugee who was sending food and clothing parcels to hungry Europeans, enlarged these gifts by adding medical supplies. Recognizing how many more people could be helped by substantial shipments of drugs, he and an associate, Dennis Karzag (who had come here from Austria), in 1918 formed the DRF non-profit corporation and began collecting medical supplies for shipment to points of urgent need around the world.

How do you get free medical supplies to give away? The samples supplied to doctors by the pharmaceutical concerns were an obvious source. The wives of doctors were invited to collect the samples and send them to the Direct Relief Foundation. They did. Once this flow of medications was started, it grew to include operating room instruments and appliances. When hospitals get new equipment, the replaced items, still quite usable in Equatorial Africa or an Andean village, are sent to the Direct Relief Foundation, where they are sorted, repaired if necessary, and scheduled for shipment to far-off rural hospitals and clinics.

Very nearly everybody gives to make this program a success. The doctors give their samples, the collectors give their time, a nationwide crew of women flyers carry the medical supplies and other items to Santa Barbara. The lady aviators do it free because they would be flying anyway—it's a hobby of theirs—and transporting supplies on the way to needy people makes it a very respectable hobby indeed. Meanwhile, Direct Relief Foundation has no shipping charges to pay, since close to a hundred women flyers ferry the materials toward and to Santa Barbara. The Foundation has two enormous warehouses—one in Los Angeles as well as the one in Santa Barbara—where volunteer workers inspect, sort, and make the supplies ready for crating. (They are packed under the supervision of a licensed pharmacist, as

required by law—and pharmaceuticals are sent only overseas, again as required by law. Medical equipment, however, is given to rural clinics and small regional hospitals in this country as well as abroad.)

Seven years ago, after a visit to the DRF headquarters, Norman Cousins wrote in the *Saturday Review:*

> The labels on the crates read like a Baedeker guide to far away places. During my visit I saw labels carrying the names of hospitals with addresses such as Zuma Memorial Hospital, Irrua, Bennin Province, Nigeria; Damien Leprosy Centre. . . .; St. Paul's Hospital . . . Korea; Department of Health, . . . Negros Occidental, Philippines; McKean Leprosy Hospital, Chiengmai, Thailand.
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> Not all the medicaments distributed by DRF are unused physicians' samples. Millions of dollars worth of drugs are contributed directly by pharmaceutical companies. Also contributed . . . are various items of equipment—dentist's chairs, x-ray machines, hospital beds, operating tables, surgical instruments, electrocardiograph machines, and sundry diagnostic devices.

The shipments are large—enough to supply a small hospital with its essential needs for a year. The typical shipment is four large crates weighing up to 400 pounds each. They go by boat.

An odd item of great value few would ever think of is used glasses—eyeglasses—which have been turned in to optometrists by people needing new prescriptions. If you visit the DRF warehouse you may see fifty or sixty thousand such spectacles, awaiting coding by optometrists so that they will suit—more or less—wearers in faraway places where people now have no glasses at all.

One other feature of the Direct Relief Foundation deserves notice. Since 1964, Mr. Karzag relates, DRF has been recruiting doctors and nurses for service in out-of-the-way places—in Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and areas wholly without medical service. Some of these volunteers work without compensation (just subsistence), while others are paid what they need. The younger doctors go because of the altruistic longing which led them to study medicine. The older ones are sometimes looking for "adventure," or want to "see the world," but to a man—or woman—Mr. Karzag says, they come back from these tours of duty noticeably transformed. Their devotion to the good of others has come to the fore and seems likely to stay there. Hundreds of doctors go out on DRF-located assignments every year.

The governments of the beneficiary countries hardly know all this help is going on. DRF works directly with people who live in the regions to which shipments go. The help is provided only when asked for—and there is, of course, a waiting list. The DRF has a network of cooperators around the world who screen requests and watch over the deliveries of medicine and equipment.

We have reported on this work because it seems a splendid illustration of how spontaneous human qualities, so largely repressed by institutional barriers, are able to find expression through the ingenious use of an institution: which does exactly what it is supposed to do, because of the human beings who shaped and administer it. The DRF welcomes both financial and volunteer aid.